The steady drum beat of feet hitting the ground, one after the other. The cadence of mind and body, syncing together and putting distractions aside as the sun shines and the wind blows. The ability to truly zone out and just “be.”

That is what being outdoors and running means to Norma Kostecka.

But it has been a journey to get back to that magical place again. Kostecka, 53, the advertising director for the Napa Valley Register, was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2014. She discovered a lump two days after Christmas in 2013. For the vibrant Napa woman with a contagious smile, the diagnosis was a surprise.

“I had just had a mammogram back in July of 2013 and there was no evidence of a lump let alone a tumor,” she said. “I come from a family of 11 kids and none of us have any history of cancer, so this was completely out of the blue.”

As tests confirmed the diagnosis, Kostecka soon found herself in the care of a team from Kaiser Permanente, dedicated to her well-being.

“At my first appointment at the Breast Care Center, feeling scared and numb from the news I had cancer I was introduced to my team of doctors. They were kind, caring and patient. From that moment on I knew they were going to take care of me,” said Kostecka.

“Dr. Van Noord, my surgeon, patiently included my family in all discussions pertaining to my surgery. His sense of calmness was comforting. Dr. Price, my plastic surgeon, is simply out of this world wonderful. Dr. Truong, my oncologist, is special. She’s truly an angel in my eyes.”

Just two and a half weeks after finding that lump, Kostecka underwent a double mastectomy.

“I was really educated by my team of doctors and specialists,” she said. “The information they provided allowed my husband and me the knowledge to make decisions with confidence. I am grateful for my team at Kaiser Permanente. They are truly special.”

Kostecka kept that positive attitude through four rounds of chemotherapy treatment.

“I swear, I had every side effect possible,” recalls Kostecka with a laugh. “With chemo treatments there are good days and bad days. In particular, the day after a chemo treatment was one of my good days. On those Fridays my husband and I would go for a hike. Hiking and being outdoors is a passion we share. Hiking wasn’t easy, my pace was dependent on my strength (or lack of). Trails took six or seven hours, but we always finished. My husband knew it was important to me to stay active. I didn’t want to give in to the physical limitations of recovering from cancer.”

Soon, the couple had a touching memento of Norma’s cancer journey. “After every hike, Scott took a picture of me to remind me how strong I was.”

The two kept walking and hiking as Norma recovered and a new goal was in sight: a half marathon.

“I love to run. I wasn’t going to let cancer take this away from me.” said Kostecka. “Running puts me in a zone, which is a perfect mind-body connection for me.”

Kostecka started training for the Napa Half Marathon in August. Trained by her husband, she started with short routes and slowly worked back up to running longer distances, eventually adding some hill climbs to test her endurance.

“My husband endured this cancer journey with me and I wasn’t about to do this run without him,” said Kostecka. “We were going to cross that finish line together.”

On Sept. 27, Norma and her husband Scott, lined up with hundreds of other runners ready to tackle the marathon.

“Crossing the finish line was my way of acknowledging I beat cancer,” she said. “Throughout the course of my cancer journey kept me in the zone. My friends and family that supported me with their care and prayers, especially my two special personal nurses Kendall and Janet. My co-workers and staff that reminded me daily with their photos and emails that I was missed. Mostly I thought of Scott, who lovingly cared for me through my good and bad days. Ryan, who sent me motivational poems daily and Megan, who was my rock.”

Kostecka crossed that finish line hand-in-hand with her husband. This was his first race and Norma’s fifth race, but her first since her cancer diagnosis. She ran her best time ever and scored a personal best.

“This was my race,” she said. “Cancer took running from me but this race was closure. It was the last piece. I got my hair back, my weight back and my health. Now it was just about the running.”

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